

## *The Legacy of Tommy L.*

*By Hon. John C. Vehlow*

By way of introduction, the name on the side of my boat reads “Judge Bubba”, and I love to bass-fish. To hear me talk with my Texas accent, you wouldn’t know I have lived in Idaho almost half of my life. I have fished competitively here, whenever I could, since the early years of club tournaments during the late 1970’s. Also, I have been presiding as magistrate judge at the Ada County Juvenile Court since 1990. I want to tell you about the time when my job responsibilities converged with my passion for fishing; I want to tell you about Tommy L.

It can easily be said that I “have seen and heard just about everything” during my tenure as a juvenile judge in Boise, Idaho. In November 1999 an 11-year-old boy named Tommy L. came before my court for sentencing on arson, disrupting the educational process and battery charges. Tommy had attempted to set a mattress on fire in somebody’s garage, angrily tipped over all the desks in his classroom and beat on his little brother. Why, you may ask, such trouble for a boy so young? Well, his parents divorced when Tommy was 6 years of age following much domestic violence within the home; father was an alcoholic with a criminal record who fled arrest warrants to California; mother was a “recovering” drug user with a criminal record; there had been 23 referrals to Health and Welfare, Child Protection regarding neglect and abuse in the home; Tommy had been hospitalized three times in 1999 for depression and suicide attempts and was on medications; Tommy would physically abuse his pets, repeatedly hurt his siblings and hear voices telling him to “do things”; mother said Tommy would not follow her rules because “he likes to do what he wants to do.” At the time of sentencing, Tommy L. had served 41 days in detention, and his mother did not visit him once while he was in custody.

For some unknown reason during Tommy’s sentencing hearing in 1999 and for the first time in my judicial career, I promised Tommy L. that, if he successfully completed probation and did not commit any more crimes, I would take him on a fishing trip in my boat. Perhaps I saw it as a safe bet because a kid that young, with so many strikes against him, would eventually get committed by my court order to state custody with the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections.

Instead, Health and Welfare removed him from his home and placed him in a stable foster care environment. With the aid of his caseworker, probation officer, foster parents and counselors, Tommy L. successfully completed probation without further criminal activity by year-end of 2000...and I owed him a fishing trip.

I procrastinated in spite of the note stuck on the edge of my computer, as well as a reminder by Tommy’s probation officer that he had not forgotten, but it was obvious that I had to keep my promise. It was late August 2001 and almost time for Tommy L. to start his fall semester of school. So I set up a Saturday afternoon trip to Lake Lowell and cajoled my fishing buddy Doug Stowers to go along as logistical support and as a witness. It was a beautiful day. Lake Lowell was very low due to the drought, and I knew a bunch of catchable fish were stacked in the Equalizer. We picked up Tommy L., now almost 13 years old, with his trout pole and spinning reel and went to the lake. At the launch I put Tommy in a life jacket, sat him in my lap and headed out, letting him steer my bass boat. Tommy had never been in such a boat, and he was so excited. When we started fishing, I hooked the first bass and let Tommy come forward to reel it in. I hooked a second bass, and Tommy ran up, pried my hands off the rod and reeled it in. Doug let Tommy do the same on some of his fish, and by the end of the day, Tommy caught a few on his own pole. We fished until almost dark, took some photos and stopped for burgers in Nampa on the way home. While ordering, Tommy looked up at me and said, “Judge Vehlow, I want you to know this has been the greatest day of my life!”

Whoa! Talk about, knock me over!! I barely contained my tears in front of the kid, and I still today cannot tell that story to an audience without becoming emotional. I kept my promise, but Tommy L. was the one who taught me that day at Lake Lowell...that, as adults, regardless of whom we think we are, or how hectic our daily lives are, we should still take time to give a kid a hand up.

Sadly, there are many more Tommy L.’s out there, more than you can possibly imagine. Now, I see how they can be helped by tournament bass fishermen. Adults who fish competitively in bass tournaments are good sportsmen, possessing strong moral and ethical values, a desire for stewardship and conservation of the fisheries resource and youthful enthusiasm about catching bass. Few, if any, people are better suited to infuse energy and excitement into the spirit of a troubled child.

Accordingly, I encourage the Idaho Bass Federation through its local clubs and circuits, as well as the bass fishing federations in other states, to sponsor a bass tournament for kids who are on juvenile court probation. If it is true that we, as tournament fishermen, have a responsibility to serve as role models for our younger generations, such tournaments could be a method of doing so, and I suspect the effort would reap great rewards in the lives of these young people. I urge you to embrace the concept for these bass tournaments because it is a satisfying feeling to realize you have served as a mentor to a child in need of positive guidance and direction.

